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Tax input heard



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Barbara Saifman of Painesville Township addresses the Lake County board of commissioners on Thursday during a public hearing concerning the proposed sales tax increase at the Lake County Administration Building.

Lake commissioners hold public hearing concerning proposed sales tax increase

John Arthur Hutchison

JHutchison@News-Herald.com
Twitter: @newsheraldjah

Lake County commissioners on Thursday conducted the first of two public hearings designed to allow residents to voice their opinions on a proposed 0.5 percent sales tax increase and to let com-

missioners further explain their proposal.

Part of the commissioners' plan consists of reducing property tax inside millage dedicated to the county's general fund and a 50 percent reduction in stormwater management fees to property owners who live in communities served by the county Stormwater

Management Department.

The sale tax and property tax changes would be effective April 1. The county's total sales tax rate is 6.25 percent, of which the county receives 0.50 percent and Laketran receives 0.25 percent. The state of Ohio receives 5.5 percent.

Lake County's total rate is currently among the lowest in the

state and is lower than neighboring Geauga (6.5 percent), Ashtabula (6.5 percent) and Cuyahoga (7.75 percent) counties.

Property tax inside millage dedicated to the county's general fund is 2.1 mills and commissioners would reduce the rate to property owners to 1 mill.

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A reduction can only be done by an act of the commissioners.

For each \$100,000 of property valuation, 2.1 mills generates \$64.31 per year; 1 mill would generate \$30.63 per year, according to the county Auditor's Office. The reduction would be reflected on tax bills in 2013.

Stormwater management user fees to property owners within the county's stormwater management district would be reduced effective next year.

Residential parcel owners now pay \$9.60 annually in communities that participate in Level 1 service and \$30 annually for residential parcel owners in communities that have Level 2 service.

Commissioners said they need to do something to address the county's budget shortfall that has caused a number of layoffs.

Lake County Sheriff Daniel A. Dunlap also announced Thursday that he had to lay off four additional deputies from his agency's road patrol, effective Jan. 28.

A fifth deputy layoff was avoided by the recent retirement of Capt. Lonnie Sparkman, Dunlap said.

The sheriff said that brings the total number of deputies laid off since 2009 to 55 and a reduction of deputies on patrol to 17 down from 36.

Of those 17 deputies remaining, seven are paid for by the townships of Concord and Painesville, Dunlap said.

"We're telling people that we're having a real hard time keeping three cars on the road during a shift," he said.

Even with the sales tax increase, additional revenue wouldn't start coming into the county until July because it takes about three months to see the revenue distributed to

the county from the state, officials said.

During the afternoon portion of Thursday's hearing about 15 residents spoke and opinions were mixed.

Kirtland resident George Lunka, who is in the housing construction business, said he was concerned about the potential increase because his industry has to pay sales tax on the materials to build homes.

"We buy a lot of materials... and we pay sales tax on them," Lunka said. "If I buy \$200,000 of materials cost in a new home and I have to pay 0.5 percent more on that, it's a \$1,000 price increase."

Commissioners also were asked about if they considered putting the sales tax proposal on the ballot.

"We have cut for the past five years and made adjust-

ments for the past five years," Commissioner Raymond E. Sines said.

He said commissioners had hoped the economy would pick up and they tried to be "meaner and leaner" before going to the taxpayers to ask for additional dollars.

Troy said the sales tax could be subject to a referendum if people don't agree with the increase. However, the property tax reduction and stormwater management fee reduction would not be.

Sines said it would take about 9,000 signatures if voters wanted to put a referendum on the ballot.

"We've tried to do the responsible thing and cutting staff and cutting departments, we felt the taxpayers demanded of it and now we're at the point where it's services," Sines

said.

Troy said commissioners delayed for as long as possible to seek the sales tax increase and believes commissioners aren't "telling people what they want to hear, but what they have to hear."

"We've tried to squeeze it as far as we can," Troy said. "Now it gets down to the point of services."

Commissioner Robert E. Aufdush said an increase in sales tax revenue would not "open the floodgates" and bring back the number of employees to the numbers from years ago.

"Lake County government is going to be operating at a new level, not the level it used to operate," Aufdush said.

Another handful of residents spoke out at the evening portion of the public hearing with

a slight majority in favor of the sales tax hike.

Lisa Hlebak, a Painesville Township resident and former county Elections Board deputy director, said the proposal may come at a small cost for some, but would help ensure Lake County residents maintain their quality of life.

"I've seen the effects higher taxes have had on other counties," Hlebak said. "They can't pay for maintenance and (county employees) work in deplorable conditions. We shouldn't ntipick a half-percent sales tax increase."

Other residents wondered if commissioners would reevaluate the tax situation once the economy stabilizes and eventually rebounds.

"At some point the economy will grow and we'll have more inflation again," Mentor resi-

dent Richard Freedman said. "What guarantee do we have that (county government) won't overexpand again?"

At Freedman's suggestion, the commissioners said they would look at the possibility of adding a provision to the proposal to revert to current rates after a number of years.

As for county government expansion, Sines said based on the proposed tax changes as well as nationwide economic trends, the county would be best served staying lean and helping local businesses thrive and create jobs.

"The real future in this county is growing jobs in the private sector rather than reinstating all those government jobs," Sines said.

Staff Writer Max Reinhart contributed to this article.